

ARK OF LIFE RELOADED

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Many people will have heard of the Ark of Life project and just wondered why there hasn't been much news lately. Others however will be completely unfamiliar with the project so let me give a short introduction to the project and then get into the actual update that is the reason why I'm writing this.

In 2009, Stewart McPherson developed the idea of an *ex situ* (specimens in cultivation) conservation project for several highly endangered species of *Nepenthes*.

Basically, Stewart found that that the lists of endangered species that were in use didn't reflect the actual situation of species in the wild. Investigating, he found several reasons for this. First, the available data on the wild situation was very limited as not many scientists actually went into the wild to collect information on these plants. The second big reason was that within organizations like CITES (which deals with trade rules for endangered plants) other species, and particularly orchids, had priority. This resulted in strange listings, like having *Nepenthes rajah* listed as CITES Appendix I (the highest level of protection), while it is relatively safe in a nature reserve and guarded by rangers. On the other hand, *Nepenthes rigidifolia*, which, based on its known locations, might very well be effectively extinct in the wild, isn't even mentioned specifically and is relegated to Appendix II classification of "all other *Nepenthes*".

Stewart decided that he wanted to start a project that with a limited amount of money could save the most endangered species by bringing a reasonable amount of genetic variation of those species into cultivation. This goal would be easier to achieve than *in situ* (in the wild) conservation, because saving habitat and providing protection is a slow and costly process that would likely take more time than some species had. He also made some startup capital available through his company, Redfern Natural History Productions.

In 2010, the biennial ICPS conference was held in The Netherlands and on this occasion the first Ark of Life collection was created. Redfern and the ICPS partnered to provide the initial funding and the Hortus botanicus, the botanical garden of the University of Leiden, The Netherlands agreed to house this collection and take care of it. The Ark project started as a small operation with just four target species, *Nepenthes clipeata*, *N. rigidifolia*, *N. khasiana*, and *N. aristolochioides*. Plants were donated by some large nurseries, a website and a Facebook page were created, and a not-for-profit company was set up in the UK.

Initially this went rather well and individual plants and money were donated by private individuals and local carnivorous plant societies, but in 2012 things got a bit quiet.

I would like to explain briefly what happened. Basically, Ark of Life was a one-man operation by Stewart who had no real backup and who had a lot of work on his plate. This included the production of several great books and also the shooting of a 4-part documentary series about the nature of the British overseas territories that will likely hit the screens in 2015 (watch for it, it is really worth watching). The only practical support he had was given by yours truly in the form of some paper shuffling, however, as Stewart still actually controlled everything, progress was made by periods of long waits till he was again back in civilization and short sprints until he left again.

On top of that, the website went down partly because of regular hacking and partly because the company that had built it went bankrupt. A little later, the e-mail account also stopped working.

Lots of fun, I can assure you.

That doesn't mean that nothing was happening. The plants in The Ark received proper care, money and plants were donated, and a search for members of an actual board for The Ark started. Preparations were also made to expand The Ark with other species and policy discussions were held.

So, what is the “State of The Ark” at this moment?

The Ark has a living collection of plants housed in Leiden that consists of several clones of *N. clipeata*, *N. aristolochioides*, *N. khasiana*, *N. rigidifolia*, *N. vogelii*, and *N. bokorensis*.

Additional hosts were found for a South African Ark and a *Sarracenia* Ark in well-known UK growers Nigel Hewitt-Cooper and Mike King.

A board for The Ark was founded with the following volunteers:

Tim Bailey: Manager, *Sarracenia* Ark

Marcel van den Broek: Administrator

Christian Dietz: Manager, South African Ark

James Ellis: Deputy Manager, *Sarracenia* Ark

Stewart McPherson: Promotions and Fundraising

Francois Mey: Manager, *Nepenthes* Ark

Alastair Robinson: Advisor

Mark Rouse: Deputy Manager, *Nepenthes* Ark

Andy Smith: Advisor

John van der Werf: Treasurer

As I’m writing this we are building the new and much improved website. This will be done in several phases as available time is limited, but the results will be worth it.

Species for the South African Ark have been selected and appropriate basic texts have been written. These species are:

- *Drosera capensis*
- *Drosera cistiflora*
- *Drosera cuneifolia*
- *Drosera coccipetala*
- *Drosera ericgreenii*
- *Drosera esterhuyseniae*
- *Drosera glabripes*
- *Drosera hilaris*
- *Drosera pauciflora*
- *Drosera ramentacea*. This is the true species, not the improperly used name for the commonly occurring *Drosera madagascariensis* that the pharmaceutical industry uses.
- *Drosera regia*
- *Drosera slackii*
- *Drosera zeyheri*
- *Roridula dentata*
- *Roridula gorgonias*

More species may be added as their conservation status becomes clearer.

To the growers of carnivorous plants, *Drosera capensis* might look like a strange addition as it is a commonly grown species and even a weed in most collections. Fact is however that most plants in cultivation can be traced back to a limited number of plants, propagated by tissue culture. The situation in the wild is different and on top of that the species appear to be quite variable and might at one point have to be divided into (sub)species.

Species for the *Sarracenia* Ark are also selected, specifically:

- *Sarracenia oreophila* var. *oreophila*
- *Sarracenia oreophila* var. *ornata*

- *Sarracenia purpurea* subsp. *venosa* var. *montana*
- *Sarracenia rubra* subsp. *alabamensis*
- *Sarracenia rubra* subsp. *jonesii*

Texts for this Ark are in the draft stage.

A thorough policy paper is just about finished and deals with everything from goals, priorities, and several legal aspects.

On the last (the legal) front, a major development is in progress. The Ark is changing status from an UK based not-for-profit company to a foundation with full Charity status under Dutch Law.

These are all huge jobs and they took time, especially in setting them up.

I hope I have given you a good explanation why The Ark has been a bit silent. If all goes as planned, you will start hearing a lot about us during the upcoming year and many years after that.

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